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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000389

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TAGS: PREL PHUM SCUL SY

SUBJECT: ASSYRIAN ORTHODOX PATRIARCH CRITICIZES U.S. AT  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

REF: DAMASCUS 00375

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: During the opening session of a two-day international conference entitled "The Message of Peace in Islam," the Assyrian Orthodox Patriarch Mar Zakka Ewas attacked the U.S. for using the fight against "Islamic terrorism" as a pretext for extending its hegemony in the region. The Ministry of Religious Endowments, in cooperation with the British Embassy, hosted the international conference on June 1 and 2. The event brought together an international cast of religious leaders, educators, diplomats, politicians, and economic scholars, from the U.K., Egypt, Qatar, and Syria to address topics of religious extremism, poverty, and human rights. END SUMMARY

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The Assyrian Orthodox Attack  
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¶2. (SBU) A priest in the Assyrian Orthodox Church delivered the prepared speech of the Assyrian Orthodox Patriarch Mar Zakka Ewas, who was unable to attend, before a packed auditorium of more than 300 people. The Patriarch's speech lambasted the U.S. for having manipulated the events of 9/11 for political gain. The U.S., he said, preferred the "language of force" over the "language of diplomacy" in its effort to "force its hegemony on the world and plunder the world's resources."

¶3. (SBU) The speech blamed the U.S. for having failed both to develop a cogent definition of "terrorism" and to delineate between "terrorism" and "resistance," as the rest of the international community had done. In fact, he argued, the U.S. had used "Islamic terrorism" as a "Trojan horse to attack any part of the world it wanted." Hoping to distance the Christian church in Syria from its western counterparts, the Patriarch called on Syrian Muslims to continue living in harmony with their Christian brethren and to remember that just as Islam did not equal terrorism, the West was not exclusively representative of Christianity.

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Other Opening Remarks More Muted  
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¶4. (SBU) Also featured at the opening session were British Ambassador Simon Collis, Syrian Grand Mufti Dr. Ahmad Badr Hassoun, Syrian Minister of Religious Endowments Dr. Muhammad Abdel Sattar al-Sayed, and Dr. Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Butti, the Dean of the Faculty of Sharia' at Damascus

University. None of the aforementioned speakers made any direct attacks on, or even obliquely referred to, the U.S. Only al-Butti approached the hot-button issue of Islam's role in politics, musing, "When political leadership is dominated by religious control, I believe peace will dominate all over the world." Al-Butti concluded his remarks by admonishing his "brothers" in the audience to bring political life under divine control.

¶5. (SBU) Both the Grand Mufti and Minister al-Sayed made general reference to the importance of President Bashar al-Assad's leadership, and particularly noted how his recent speech at the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) Conference held in Damascus on May 22 (reftel) had clearly articulated the Syrian attitude towards regional peace and Islam. Al-Sayed went so far as to say that Asad's OIC speech was the "main axis of this conference." On the subject of terrorism, al-Sayed referred to Asad's OIC axiom that terrorism was not a security issue, but an intellectual one; to fend off terrorism one must exercise "intellectual security" in the face of any type of extremism.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The SARG has long touted Syria's environment of religious egalitarianism, pointing out that it is one of the few Arab countries to have successfully promoted the peaceful coexistence of different religious groups under a secular government.

¶7. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The British have been seeking to establish cooperation on counter-radicalization (of Muslims) as a basis of their bilateral relationship. UK Ambassador Collis, however, told Charge that the Assyrian Patriarch's remarks had been unacceptable and that he (Collis) would raise the matter with the Ministry. At no time during the five opening speeches did the subject of tensions between Sunni and Shi'a come up. This subject is widely perceived by Syrians to be too risky for public debate in that it risks one of the SARG's favorite reasons for jailing activists--namely, the crime of "inciting sectarian strife." As a result, the approach toward Islam by all the speakers was generally monolithic and uncritical. END COMMENT

CONNELLY